

# Operation Wedding Gown helps military brides plan for their big day

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NORFOLK -- A line of military brides-to-be stretched around Maya Couture Bridal Salon in Norfolk, waiting for the doors to open to get the chance to find their dream dress during the 6th annual Operation Wedding Gown event, Nov. 12.

Each year, Brides Across America, a national non-profit organization, travels the country giving military service members with future wedding plans, the opportunity to receive a free gown. For the past five years, they have partnered with Maya Couture Bridal Salon to participate in the giveaway.

"There is nothing more rewarding than to be able to give in this manner and show our appreciation to the men and women who choose to serve our country and make so many sacrifices to do so," said Maya Warburton Holihan, owner of Maya Couture. "Hosting this event each year puts perspective and a greater purpose back into my life, my employees and all the volunteers who help to make this day so special for the brides we are so happy to serve."

Many brides-to-be camped out in front of the salon as early as Saturday afternoon to make sure they had the first pick of dresses.

Tawny Lynee Munn, whose fiancé is in the Navy and currently stationed in El Paso, Texas, was first in line and ready to find her dream dress

for her Dec. 28 wedding.

"I've shopped around and there's definitely an art to it," said Munn about finding the perfect dress. "It's one of those things that when you look at gowns you say, 'it looks beautiful,' but you don't know what it looks like until you see it on."

To prepare for the event, the store received more than 60 brand new designer gowns to add to the selection of the 100-gown giveaway to the first 100 qualified brides-to-be.

"We will also provide sample gowns and discontinued gowns from our stock," said Holihan. "The gowns range in price from about \$800 - \$2,500."

U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Antoinette Gibson came to the event not knowing what kind of dress she was looking for, but her wedding consultant (assigned to her at the door) sorted through the 100 gowns and helped her walk away with a dress to wear at her Jan. 12 wedding.

"I'm not really picky, I'm very thankful to just get a dress," said Gibson about the opportunity to participate in the event.

To date, Brides Across America has donated more than 8,000 wedding gowns from prominent designers, and Maya Couture has donated more than 300 gowns, all in effort to support military brides in their wedding. For Maya Couture, the event has grown since the stores' first

giveaway in 2008.

"On a national level, the event and overall movement have grown significantly," said Holihan. "Operation Wedding Gown made headlines when it was featured on NBC's "Making a Difference" with Brian Williams this fall, and Brides Across America was just recently honored by the Joining Forces program, a national initiative to support and honor America's service members and their families, which was launched by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden."

To further support military troops and veterans, a portion of all accessory sales generated at the salon during the gown giveaway will go toward the Navy Seal Foundation. In addition to the accessories, the registration fee for the event will go to support Patriot Rovers, a non-profitable organization focused on providing trained and certified psychiatric service dogs to veterans struggling with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) acquired while serving on active duty.

To help make this year stand out from the past five partnered-years, Maya Couture will host The Red, White and Something Blue Wedding Giveaway, which will give one military couple the opportunity to win an all expense paid complimentary wedding valued at \$20,000.

"I believe we make dreams come true on a daily basis," said Holihan. "But on this day, we get to touch the lives of so many people in this very special way, and hear their stories and shed tears of joy. My dreams are coming true too."

